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Lucia A Keegan 11/14/2006 10:13:16 AM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 007321

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/07/2016  
TAGS: [FR](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN EMBASSY OFFICIAL: NABIH BERRI IS A JOKE,  
DIALOGUE WILL FAIL

REF: A. BEIRUT 3565

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 3584

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Embassy Paris NEA Watcher met 11/7 with his  
Egyptian counterpart, Yahya Oda, and 11/8 with Lebanese  
Charge d'Affaires Ghady al-Khoury (protect), to discuss  
political developments in Lebanon. While Oda predicted the  
current dialogue between the March 14 Group and  
Hizballah/Aounists would go nowhere, al-Khoury believed PM  
Siniora would eventually be compelled to accept an expansion  
of his cabinet on Hizballah's terms. End summary.

Questioning the MFA's Official Line  
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[1](#)2. (C) Speaking about the current dialogue in Beirut between  
PM Siniora and the March 14 group leaders on the one hand,  
and Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun and Hizballah  
on the other, Oda said that the Egyptian MFA's official line  
is that Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri is doing a great  
job in facilitating the talks, and serves as an important  
intermediary between Siniora and Hizballah. Shifting to what  
Oda said was his personal analysis, he dismissed Berri as "a  
joke" with no real power and predicted that the current  
dialogue would go nowhere.

[1](#)3. (C) Oda further assessed that Hizballah leader Hassan  
Nasrallah's threat to mobilize vast demonstrations if Siniora  
did not agree to expand his cabinet on Hizballah's terms was  
a sign of weakness, not of strength. While Nasrallah's  
popularity had soared in the immediate aftermath of the  
recent conflict with Israel, with each passing day more and

more Lebanese were coming to view the war as a disaster for Lebanon. Moreover, Hizballah found itself constrained by the LAF's deployment in southern Lebanon alongside a strengthened UNIFIL, discomfited by PM Siniora's international support, and dismayed by the prospect of further international pressure on the implementation of UNSCR 1701. Nasrallah was therefore scrambling to capitalize on his waning aura of victory by bandying about threats in the hope of securing lasting political advantage.

¶4. (C) However, Oda said Nasrallah was too shrewd to permit any Hizballah demonstration to turn violent. The sight of Hizballah supporters attacking Saad Hariri's Sunni supporters, for example, would cost Nasrallah much of his popularity in the Arab world. Moreover, Oda predicted that if it came to violence, Michel Aoun's Maronite supporters -- already uncomfortable with Aoun's alliance with the Shi'a -- would flock to Lebanese Forces leader Samir Ja'Ja'. Finally, Nasrallah knew that even if he put one million demonstrators on the street, the March 14th group could do the same. Noisy confrontations would therefore solve nothing.

#### Hizballah Turning the Other Cheek?

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¶5. (C) In an 11/8 meeting, Lebanese Charge d'Affaires Ghady al-Khoury agreed that Nasrallah was determined to avoid violence. Ghady said that senior figures in Amal had assured him that Nasrallah had ordered his followers not to respond with violence even if they found themselves the victims of aggression. However, al-Khoury assessed that Nasrallah was negotiating from a position of strength because the March 14 coalition could not match Hizballah's demonstrators man for man, nor could they match Hizballah's organizational capacity. Moreover, he said that Hizballah had cleverly offered to accept less than a blocking one-third minority's worth of seats in PM Siniora's cabinet, provided that Siniora and his allies agreed to new parliamentary elections. But Druze Leader Walid Jumblatt would never accept such a proposition, because Jumblatt stood to lose the most from any fresh round of elections. Consequently, al-Khoury predicted it would only be a matter of time before Siniora agreed to allow Aoun and Hizballah into the cabinet on their terms (i.e., with the necessary number of seats to block any cabinet decision they might disagree with) in order to avoid the greater evil of elections.

¶6. (C) As for the Aoun-Hizballah alliance, al-Khoury noted that Aoun firmly believed that Hizballah's leadership had never lied to him, unlike nearly all of the politicians he currently found himself at odds with. Moreover, Aoun found it ironic to be accused of being pro-Syrian by politicians who had all accommodated the Syrian occupation of Lebanon over the course of many years. In his own mind, Aoun believed his anti-Syrian credentials were stronger than anyone's -- a point al-Khoury echoed. "It's ridiculous to call Aoun pro-Syrian," he said.

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